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# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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May 2, 2007

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman  
Chairman  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am writing to ask that the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform investigate the current state of emergency preparedness of the District of Columbia's fire hydrant system. The failure of the two fire hydrants nearest the fire at the Georgetown Public Library raises serious concerns about the availability of adequate water supplies in a fire emergency in the District of Columbia.

As the Nation's capital, Washington can ill afford a lack of functioning fire hydrants. While the hydrant problems in Georgetown were serious enough for one fire, more widespread problems could have catastrophic consequences in the event of a terrorist attack. Indeed, the absence of an effective water supply to fight fires could embolden prospective terrorists to launch an attack in the District that causes widespread fire that could not be contained.

There is ample reason to be concerned that the problem in Georgetown may not be an isolated one. According to today's Washington Post, a District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority (WASA) list of hydrants needing repair or replacement did not include the two in Georgetown.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a list kept by one firehouse reflected "several [hydrants] . . . not on WASA's list . . ."<sup>2</sup> This raises serious questions about the way the list is maintained by WASA and how the Fire Department reports damaged hydrants to WASA.

<sup>1</sup> "Across D.C., Dozens of Hydrants Are Broken," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2007, A01.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The Committee should examine the adequacy of WASA's inspection and maintenance program. WASA's General Manager Jerry N. Johnson apparently claims that if a hydrant is reported out of service, it is inspected within 24 hours and repaired within five days.<sup>3</sup> But that appears not to have occurred with respect to the damage to one of the Georgetown hydrants, which was "known" to WASA after it was reported by the police to be leaking on February 6 of this year, turned off, and never repaired.<sup>4</sup> In addition, damage to the other nonfunctioning hydrant appears to have never even been reported.<sup>5</sup>

Does WASA wait for someone else to report an out of service hydrant? How often does WASA itself inspect them? What really happens to the reports of damaged hydrants? Are reports from others -- police, fire department, citizens -- treated differently from reports from WASA inspections?

These and other questions must be answered to ensure that the District of Columbia is fully prepared to respond to serious fire emergencies in the future.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely



Tom Davis  
Ranking Member

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.